

[home](#)[our mission](#)[contact us](#)[issue archive](#)

The Commonsplace

grassroots civics and culture in St. Louis



ADVERTISE HERE
1¢ per ad view

[Church & State](#)[Games](#)[Expatriates](#)[Communities](#)[From the Source](#)[It's All Happening](#)[Young Minds](#)[The Ordinary Eye](#)[Elsewhere](#)[Elsewhere
ARCHIVE](#)[Sights & Sounds](#)[Media Shoegaze](#)[A Day's Work](#)[From the Editor](#)

Search this site:

Dec 2003 / [elsewhere](#) :: [email this story to a friend](#)



Scotch Treat

By [Julia Smillie](#)

Our first afternoon in Glasgow in October, my husband and I took a gander down Byres Road, a haven for the students from neighboring [Glasgow University](#). We passed an alarming number of students taking Goth-wear to new heights — black eyeliner, duds, crazy wigs and (gulp) witches hats. Next, we encountered two young women dressed as bobby-soxers, like extras from a Scottish episode of [Happy Days](#) — was this retro retro?

I knew Glasgow had changed since I grew up here more than twenty years ago and certainly, as a youngster, I wouldn't have known if Glasgow was home to the absurdly hip. But I began to wonder on this return trip if Glasgow was on the cutting edge of underground culture in a way I hadn't even begun to imagine.



It was two full hours before I hit on a more revealing realization: it was Halloween.

Of course, that doesn't mean that Glasgow *isn't* on the cutting edge of underground culture — all kinds of culture, as it turns out. The city I explored and discovered on this trip was distinctly different from the one in which I grew up, the one I left at age nine. Amazingly enough, it turns out that Glasgow is not just a handful of streets stretching out under my stubby childhood legs, a grid connecting the vital spots of my childhood life — grandparents' homes, our flat, playground, primary school, sweet shop.

What Chris and I uncovered, first on Byres Road and then over the course of a few days checking out the city, is that Glasgow is dazzling. Hell, it's downright chic, gaining much-deserved accolades from the international travel press as a true destination location, a center of shopping, culture and nightlife surpassed only by London. Yes, that London.

On Byres Road, the University Café where my Gran once took us for ice creams still stands, boasting the same four cramped, narrow tables where my parents drank countless cups of tea while courting. But today it's surrounded by bastions of hipness, signs that Glasgow's cool, dammit. Your gran's cuppa has been replaced with piping-hot-brace-yourself cups of sophisticated coffee at internet-equipped cafés. Charity shops line the street, boasting second-hand fashion, footwear, books. Decidedly sophisticated restaurants hold their own up against stalwarts like Tennent's Pub, a tried and true watering hole for generations.

The story of Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, is one of urban regeneration with a vengeance. With a primo spot on the River Clyde, Glasgow has thrived since its medieval beginnings. During the 17th and 18th centuries, it hummed with prosperity as a merchant center. But by the next century, industry was the name of the game — steel mills, shipyards, factories — and Glasgow became, quite literally, a dirty city. While churning out some of the world's finest ocean liners, such as the Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth, Glasgow's buildings became coated in a solid coat of industrial grime. The facades of Victorian tenements and Gothic treasures were black, casting a gloomy pall over the city that far transcended Scotland's notoriously dreary weather.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, city planners took it upon themselves to reclaim Glasgow's long architectural legacy and began sandblasting the dirt off the buildings. The results have been inestimable on Glasgow's self-esteem and image. Turns out what lay underneath was a visually stunning city, particularly the red sandstone tenements that are the envy of all Europe, including the one I grew up in.

Removing the grime to reveal the gems below was symbolic of a city revealing its true identity as a design and architectural treasure, a living testament to centuries of architectural progress and celebration. Starting with Glasgow Cathedral, which dates back to 1136, Glasgow's buildings take you on a tour of virtually every architectural style throughout the ages, perhaps most notably in the works of famed architects Alexander "Greek" Thomson and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. (Fans of the latter, such as myself, have plenty to swoon over in Glasgow including the stunning Glasgow School of Art and The Willow Tea Rooms.) Fittingly, Glasgow hosted Britain's Year of Architecture and Design in 1999.

Speaking of titles, Glasgow earned the title "European City of Culture" in 1990, an accolade even more fitting now. Glasgow's got it going on when it comes to art, as evidenced by the 13 museums dedicated to it throughout the city (not counting individual galleries, of course.) The hub of it all is the stunning Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum, an architectural behemoth that is, unfortunately, closed for renovation until 2006. You can still catch some of its offerings in galleries around town in the meantime.



Determined to embrace and explore the city's civic pride, The People's Palace & History Museum is dedicated entirely to the social history of Glasgow, from 1750 to the present. In 1993, the doors were opened on the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art — not the snooze it sounds to be, this unique museum "explores the importance of religion in people's lives across the world and across time." Sweet. Add to that The Burrell Collection, which opened in 1983 and a truly fun Museum of Transport, and the only way it could possibly get any better is if they were all free. Which they are.

But what about the music, y'all? What about the sounds that keep a hip city humming? You're not going to miss out here, either. The sheer variety is slightly mind-boggling, from catching local acts strumming in pubs and bars to your choice of hot underground dance spots to national rock concerts. Plus, you'll find classical acts at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, which opened in 1990, or rock out to major acts at the Scotland Exhibition and Convention Centre, dubbed the Armadillo by locals for its architectural resemblance to a, well, you know ...

I'll confess that I'm not much of a shopper, but Glasgow's equipped for those who are, with the pedestrianization of several of its main shopping streets — Argyle, Buchanan and Sauchiehall Streets. Shopping also brings people into the city's vibrant center, where there are loads of cool bars and chic restaurants for catching a bite. I'd have thought you were far more likely to find fish 'n chips than Versace in my old hometown, but it turns out it accommodates both very nicely.

As I search for a way to tie this piece up in a neat little package, I realize there isn't one because I've barely scratched the surface of my old hometown. The one-dimensional Glasgow of my childhood is gone — partly due to my evolution, but largely due to the city's. It surprised me at every turn and I couldn't help but feel that it wasn't just me discovering Glasgow, but a city finally discovering itself — a makeover, an injection of civic pride and much-deserved although slightly begrudging accolades from snooty European neighbors. Sounds kind of like the makings of a reality show — and one I'll watch. Again and again.

Julia Carey lives in charming Maplewood and watches plenty of real reality shows.

[Church and State](#) | [Games](#) | [Expatriates](#) | [Communities](#) | [From the Source](#)
[It's All Happening](#) | [Young Minds](#) | [The Ordinary Eye](#) | [Elsewhere](#)
[Sights and Sounds](#) | [Media Shoegaze](#) | [A Day's Work](#) | [From the Editor](#)

© 2003 The Commonsplace